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Shultz: We must 'take all the defensive measures that we can'

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Terrorism is "likely to get worse before it gets better," Secretary of State George Shultz warned Wednesday. Citing "what's going on in London," he said it was "essential for us to take all of the defensive measures that we can" in "places that we are worrying about such as our embassies."

USA TODAY Correspondent William Ringle offers questions — and answers, based on knowledgeable sources — about what the administration has in mind:

Question: What is the aim of an anti-terrorist policy?

Answer: To head off state-sponsored terrorist acts against the United States when possible, and, if that does not work, to retaliate against those responsible.

Q: Does that mean hit squads that would wipe out

terrorist efforts in pre-emptive strikes before they got off the ground?

A: Yes, ultimately, but there is more to the idea than simply rubbing out terrorists. Assassinations are still prohibited by government policy, and specific plans have not been worked out.

Q: What is "state-sponsored" terrorism?

A: As the name implies, it is terrorism sponsored by a nation, rather than terrorist acts practiced by independent revolutionary groups.

Q: Examples?

A: Iran (and, by some officials, Syria) is commonly blamed for the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut a year ago and of the Marine compound last Oct. 23. North Korea is blamed for the Rangoon, Burma, bombing that wiped out half the South Korean government.

Q: Is U.S. policy aimed at

terrorists here or abroad?

A: Both.

Q: Is there a danger that counter-terrorists might hit a school or hospital and then create a public outcry?

A: Of course. But what the planners intend are "surgical" strikes to take out the terrorists or, preferably, whoever is directing them.

Q: Don't "pre-emptive" acts presume a lot better intelligence results than the United States has been getting?

A: Yes. Improved "human" intelligence (agents who could infiltrate organizations), in contrast to electronic intelligence, would be part of the plan.

Q: What's the reasoning behind the Reagan plan?

A: The underlying idea is that terrorism is a weapon of warfare, like a tank, and should be destroyed as those weapons would be.